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Commission on the Status of Women
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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in the critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: women's human rights and the elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls as defined in the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly

Statement submitted by the Al-Khoei Foundation, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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The Al-Khoei Foundation would like to express its concerns regarding violations of women's human rights and the elimination of all forms of violence. The specific subject matter we would like to address is the rights of Muslim women both as members of minority communities who are victims of discrimination in various spheres and within Muslim communities and the rights of women in relation to family, for example, domestic violence and health-related matters (HIV/AIDS awareness among Muslim women and the right to equal access to education, especially in the rural context for the girl child).

Afghanistan

Since the Taliban was removed from power in November 2001, there have been a number of positive developments regarding the status and welfare of women in Afghanistan. These have included women and children gaining greater freedom to

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participate in public life. However, with regard to health care, employment and access to education, such developments remain generally confined to the capital, Kabul.

One of the main areas of concern continues to be the personal security and safety of women, which are adversely affected by the current situation. Outside Kabul, an element of lawlessness is apparent according to sources. Such a climate has affected women in gender-specific ways. Although the Declaration of Essential Rights of Afghanistan guarantees protection and rights to women, the question of women's basic security remains.

Women in Afghanistan continue to be victims of violence and harassment, including sexual violence, preventing freedom of movement and freedom of speech and expression. In some cases, as recently reported by Human Rights Watch, there is no adequate system for access to health care and medication in the case of unwanted pregnancies resulting from rape, for example.

We welcome the Interim Administration's public endorsement of the rights of women to obtain an education and employment. Representation of women in all areas is essential to ensuring respect for women's rights, especially during the post-conflict reconstruction phase.

Female genital mutilation

In our view, female genital mutilation is a culturally-specific practice which is not condoned by Islamic law. We remain concerned that many girls in specific regions, particularly in the Middle East and Africa, but also in many other parts of the world, are at risk of mutilation. Female genital mutilation raises numerous human rights issues, including domestic violence and the physical and psychological abuse of children. It also raises serious health-related concerns.

Female genital mutilation has acquired a religious dimension and religion is sometimes used to justify its existence and application. Moreover, female genital mutilation is misleadingly often described, especially in press reports, as a "religious practice", when religion, specifically Islam, does not condone it.

Domestic violence

Physical, verbal, sexual and psychological abuse is forbidden in Islam and the Al-Khoei Foundation strongly condemns all forms of domestic violence and threats.

In this context, we are very concerned about the prevalence of honour killings — which specifically target women only — and their justification on religious grounds. We urge all member States, particularly those that have already signed and/or ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, to implement the proper procedures that will address the need to protect women from this practice.

Civil rights of women post-11 September 2001

Muslim women have been targets of physical, verbal and psychological abuse in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. This has also included discrimination in employment. In this context, we are concerned about the rise of Islamophobia and its manifestations in violence against Muslim women and the

recent noticeable rise in the influence of extreme right-wing and neo-Nazi organizations.

Women as refugees and displaced persons

Women remain particularly vulnerable as refugees and displaced persons, both in the context of conflict and migration (forced or otherwise). In refugee camps, the question of sanitation, the right to privacy and to dignity of the individual is paramount. We urge the relevant agencies and Governments to prioritize their efforts in addressing these concerns. We are also highly concerned about the persistence of trafficking in women, especially in relation to refugee and displaced women and girls, a matter that should be addressed urgently by the international community, relevant inter-governmental agencies and Governments.